

An Exploration of Placement Travel and Accommodation Issues for Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Profession Students, Universities, and Practice Educators

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Abstract

Travel and accommodation challenges for student's access to pre-registration learning environments were explored through a National Health Service England (NHSE) funded project. This was hosted by Wirral Community Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust covering the Cheshire and Mersey Integrated Care Board (ICB) area. A mixed methods service evaluation was used, using three cross-sectional surveys to discover local university placement teams, practice education facilitators and practice educators and nursing, midwifery and allied health profession student views on placement transport and accommodation challenges. One student focus group was also held to explore issues in more depth. Stakeholder participants described a range of transport and accommodation concerns, including student personal safety, transport routes, timetable challenges, financial and health burdens, and working to fixed shift patterns. Recommendations for practice include flexible shift patterns, car use guidance, free car parking, personal safety training, provision of overnight accommodation to protect wellbeing, and placement costs paid in advance. The project identified the need for a greater range of bus routes from transport providers, plus consideration for a university minibus service to reach rural community settings. The findings from this study will support placement providers and universities to maximise placement opportunities and will improve the student experience across the ICB setting. The results are applicable to other regions.

Keywords: accommodation, placements, students, transport, travel.

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Introduction

The nurse, midwife, and allied health professionals (AHPs) shortage continues to pressurise the National Health Service (NHS) (Alderwick & Charlesworth, 2022). The ambitious NHS Long Term Workforce Plan to increase adult nurse training places by 92% by 2031 (NHS England, 2023), will create additional demand for practice placements to ensure students can integrate theory with clinical skills. Alongside growth in nursing, expected increases for midwifery (13%) and allied health professionals AHPs (25%), are also projected for the workforce.

Practice placements are an essential component of pre-registration learning, ensuring nursing and midwifery students become competent and accrue at least 2300 hours to register to practice with their professional body (Nursing and Midwifery Council, (NMC) 2023). AHP requirements vary according to the applicable professional body (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012). For example, occupational therapists (OTs) need 1000 pre-registration hours to practice (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, (RCOT) 2019). University placement allocation policies take into account student reasonable adjustment plans (RAPs), student family and travel commitments. Student preferences for placements may lie within close urban areas with good transport links but may not be provided by their university due to high demand. Students are generally expected to accept the placements offered by their university. The literature reports a combination of travel, social and financial concerns in relation to travel to placement and accommodation (Smith et al., 2018).

Although rural placements can promote career intentions among allied health students (Wolfgang et al., 2019), learners can experience a range of travel challenges to complete their pre-registration practice. According to Hamshire et al., (2012), long and difficult travelling distances to placement, combined with family commitments and financial pressures caused stress among nursing and AHP students from the Northwest of England. Additionally, Pearce et al., (2022) reported that locating the healthcare provider's (HCP) work base caused anxiety for some students. Car parking issues were also seen as a stressor for healthcare students as they may need to park away from the hospital location (Hardy 2020). This added additional walking time and was seen as risky at night (Usher et al., 2022). In addition to difficult journeys, the inflexibility of practice educators to change shift times to accommodate transport timetables or childcare demands were noted by Hamshire et al. (2013).

Deville and Grant (2011) found that work, family commitments and transport links were perceived as pull factors to the urban centre as a placement location preference. However, accommodation concerns, isolation and travel costs were seen as risks associated with a rural placement. Similarly, Edmunds and Harris (2015) found that social dislocation from family and support networks, alongside isolation from peers and learning resources whilst on rural placements contributed to placement refusal or dissatisfaction by AHP students.

Travel and accommodation costs can be a financial barrier to accessing placements causing disadvantage. Deville and Grant (2011) found the extra costs for transport to and within rural placements resulted in financial hardship. Financial strain, loss of regular employment earnings, accommodation costs and transport were also noted (Edmunds & Harris, 2015; Usher et al., 2022 & Barnett et al., 2008). A spiral of disadvantage was reported by Hamshire et al., (2013) as placement travel costs resulted in students needing to work, which caused distraction from their studies. Furthermore, high financial strain and accumulation of debt can impact on student health and wellbeing (Wray & McCall, 2007).

Eligible students attending an English university can apply for the learning support fund (LSF), which provides placement travel and accommodation reimbursement. Practice learning costs can be re-claimed where the commute to placement is further than the usual term address to university distance/cost (Travel and Dual Accommodation Expenses (TDAE) (NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA) (2023)). Placement poverty experienced by health students is not only experienced in England but is a wider global issue as funding varies considerably between countries and students are often expected to carry their own financial burden for training (Fedele, 2024). In response to lobbying by universities, the Australian government has recently announced a new means tested cost of living support payment for

nursing and midwifery students who undertake mandatory workplace placements ([Ministers' Media Centre. Ministers of the Education Portfolio, 2024](#)).

Recent regional placement expansion projects, managed by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and HCP stakeholders have highlighted the transport and accommodation challenges faced by geographically remote HCPs, compared to those in inner cities or close to HEIs. Public transport links can be poorer to rural communities, and accommodation availability may be limited and costly. Fulfilling rural community placement offers where students are non-car driver/owners can also be challenging. Therefore, Wirral Community Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust hosted an NHS England funded 7-month project to explore the transport and accommodation challenges across the Cheshire and Mersey ICB. A three-pronged research question was developed, firstly to identify the transport and accommodation challenges, secondly to explore their impact on learner experience and thirdly to explore their impact on placement utilisation. The key objective was to explore and recommend sustainable solutions to transport and accommodation challenges, which prevent access to learning environments.

Methods

The project was not classed as research through the Health Research Authority decision tool, so was managed by the host NHS Trust as a service evaluation to assess how well a service is meeting its aim ([Twycross & Shorten, 2014](#)). The ethical principles of consent, anonymity and data processing were adhered to ([Whittaker & Williamson, 2011](#)). All study documents were scrutinised, and approval was awarded by the research and innovation lead for the host Trust. Oversight was given by steering group members from a regional HEI, three community NHS Trusts, plus two student quality ambassadors who were recruited from outside the ICB area. A mixed methods approach was utilised to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, and to capture the placement infrastructure challenges for each stakeholder.

Sample

The three stakeholder groups were 1) four regional Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), 2) regional practice placement provider organisations and 3) all student groups in scope. Purposive sampling was used to reach four regional HEI placement teams, alongside regional Practice Education Facilitators (PEFs) and Practice Educators (PEs) from primary and secondary care, and private, independent, and voluntary organisations. Student participants were recruited through the placement lead/ placement teams of the four regional HEIs and needed to have had at least one placement experience to participate. A PEF is responsible for overall quality of the learning environments for the HCP. A PE is directly responsible for supervision and assessment of their student/s. This service evaluation included students from all nursing branches, midwifery and AHPs. All AHPs were included in the study apart from art, music and drama therapy and healthcare science -life sciences, and neurosensory professions.

Data Collection

Engagement meetings were held online via Microsoft Teams© to introduce the project with HEI placement teams, and with PEFs online and at a face-to-face forum. Three cross-sectional surveys ([Appendix 1](#)) were developed, one for each stakeholder, using SmartSurvey© as it complies with General Data Protection Regulations ([Data Protection Act, 2018](#)), and was a suitable method to meet the project timeframe ([Walliman, 2018](#)). The surveys were anonymised to comply with ethical study principles ([Bryman, 2008](#)). Each survey consisted of between 32-45 closed and open-ended questions, which aimed to elicit a variety of responses to provide discrete, nominal, categorical and qualitative data. Question topics were developed from the existing literature to meet the study aims. Participants were questioned on journey time and distance, car user/ownership, barriers and facilitators to reaching placements (via tick options), reasonable adjustments, and placement allocation and accommodation issues. The participant information sheet (PIS) and consent were embedded into the start of the surveys, and agreement for both was given by clicking the yes options to continue onto the survey. The surveys were open for 3-5 weeks, allowing time at the commencement of the academic year for all stakeholders to contribute. The student

survey was for learners who had already been on placement so they could draw on their experiences. Invitations from three HEIs were received to share the aims of the project/survey link at face-to-face and online meetings with relevant student groups.

One online focus group took place with student participants to further explore the impact of travel. The use of group dynamics to stimulate discussion (Bowling, 2009) was expected to shine light onto personal experiences of travel and accommodation issues in placements. Students were recruited via the HEIs, and consent was gained prior to the commencement of the group. This was held and recorded on Microsoft Teams© and transcribed. Three questions were asked to the group: 1) Can you describe any particular transport and accommodation challenges? 2) How do transport and accommodation challenges affect you as a learner? 3) How can your university placement team support you with placement allocation?

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics to represent nominal and ordinal data were used to analyse the SmartSurvey© data. Quantitative analysis was supported by use of Excel Office 365. Numerical data was complemented with free text options - open-ended questions, - to explore descriptive richness and was analysed by the project lead. The free text data would also potentially support external validity of findings if the sample size was low. Focus group data were analysed by thematic analysis (Newell & Burnard, 2011).

Findings

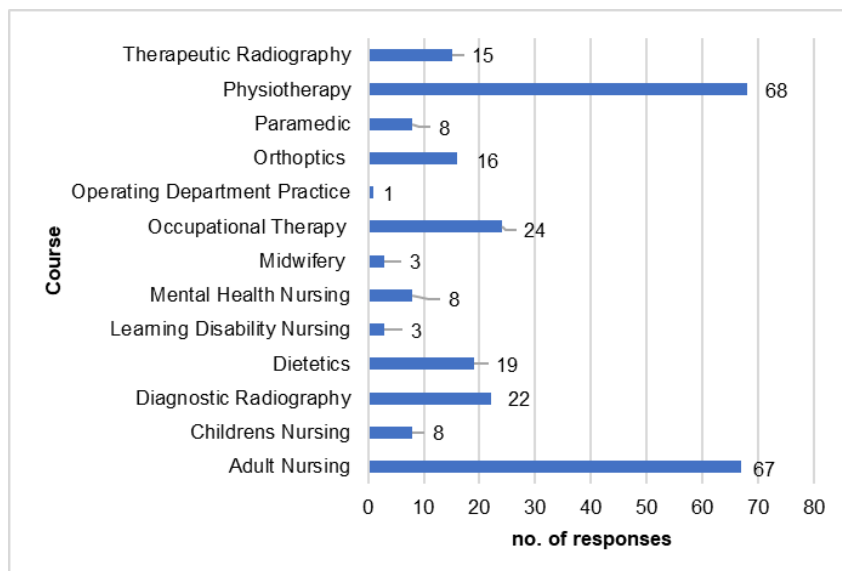
The total number of HEI surveys completed by placement teams across the four HEIs was 12, PEF/PE surveys totalled 120 (PEF n=31 and PE n=89), and student surveys totalled 262 (out of a potential 6814¹), creating a 4% response rate. The highest respondents were 3rd years (63%) followed by 2nd years (31%). Female students (82%) and the 20-29 age-range (65%) were the largest groups across student participants. Four students from three HEIs attended the focus group.

Three themes were developed from the data: firstly, “Burden”, which included four categories of physical, financial, mental health and caring; secondly “Coping”, which included coping strategies and reasonable adjustment plans (RAPs); and thirdly, “Fair Placement Allocation”. The focus group and survey results were merged to capture the breadth and depth of findings. Three or more placements had been completed by 76% of respondents. [Figure 1](#) shows the student respondents by profession.

¹ Total was provided from the HEIs 2023.

Figure 1

Student survey respondents by profession.



Placement travel expectations

Expectations for placement travel are shared by HEIs on their websites, at open events, interview, offer, enrolment, induction and placement-prep days. A signed student declaration of good character covers placement travel expectations. HEIs report students mostly keep their usual term address up to date to support allocations. Some HEI respondents reported that their travel to placement policy indicated that students should travel a maximum of 90 minutes or experience no more than 2-3 travel changes on journeys to and from placement.

HEIs considered distance to placement, travel costs, number of transport changes, childcare, reasonable adjustment needs, carer status and previous placement travel distance in allocation decisions. HEIs used google maps and a local e-system known as InPlace©, to place some professions. Students also found google maps the most reliable tool. HEI placement team respondent no.8 reported allocation demands: “*Students appear to want a placement next to their accommodation,*” and also described a lack of student understanding of the placement team role: “*Students have no idea of the real challenge of actually sourcing placements and setting them up, they think we can just get placements easily.*” Of the students who responded, 19% had declined a placement/s due to transport/travel or distance. All of those who declined a placement offer were female. Students mainly reported that they were not allowed to decline placements, as it is an essential course requirement. However, some respondents felt that to be matched to a particular practice specialism, a longer travel distance was acceptable: “...Some placement experience made the long-distance worth” (OT student no. 124).

The community health professional working day may not always start at a work base, potentially starting at home or a patient’s house. The increased travel time by PEs to collect students from train/bus stations was noted: “*Students who do not drive should not be offered community placements,*” (PE no.36). However, some PEs plan their shifts around public transport links and do offer car share. Declaring student car use to the HEI was potentially seen as problematic because students can be allocated a placement further away. A student noted that others may say that they haven’t got a car, so they are not allocated further away: “*I feel like you get a bit punished for having a car... I’ve had nothing (placement) local. I feel... a bit hard done to; I wonder whether they could just allocate a bit fairer*” (OT student focus group).

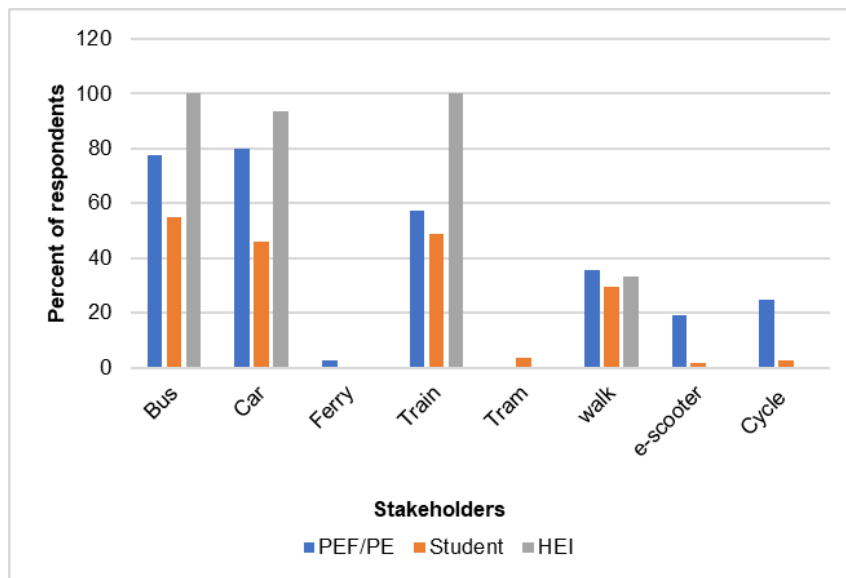
Placement journeys

Use of a car by students to complete placements was reported as useful by 58% of HEI respondents as car use can open up placement offers. PEFs/PEs reported lower need for essential car use (33%) to reach the placement location compared to thirty seven percent of students. Student's cover for business use on their car insurance was sometimes checked by HEIs (67%) but less so by PEF/PEs (27%).

The most accessible modes of transport were reported as bus, car and train for all stakeholders to reach placements (Figure 2). Use of public transport to reach placements was reported by 62% of students. Some students (28%) reported that they would consider using a university minibus to get to placement sites if available. Car hire schemes were unavailable through HEIs, or placement provider organisations, but cycle hire was available at one placement site.

Figure 2

Most accessible modes of transport for each stakeholder



The majority of respondents across all stakeholder groups reported that the student daily commute to placement -was up to 2 hours (see Figure 3). Most students (76%) reported two transport changes to reach placement from their usual term address. Some HEIs asked students to travel a daily distance of up to 50 miles. Students reported experiencing a range of travel challenges such as strikes, cancellations, walking between train/bus station and HCP, and near misses with accidents. Travelling up to 2 hours to placement and working shifts of up to 12-hours caused physical burden, plus the impact on mental health was noted: *“It just wipes you out...I was just exhausted, I couldn't do it”* (Mental Health Nursing student focus group). Convenient transport connections were seen as the strongest facilitator to reach placements (Figure 4).

Figure 3

Predicted student daily commute time (HEI and PEFs) and actual commute time reported by students (%)

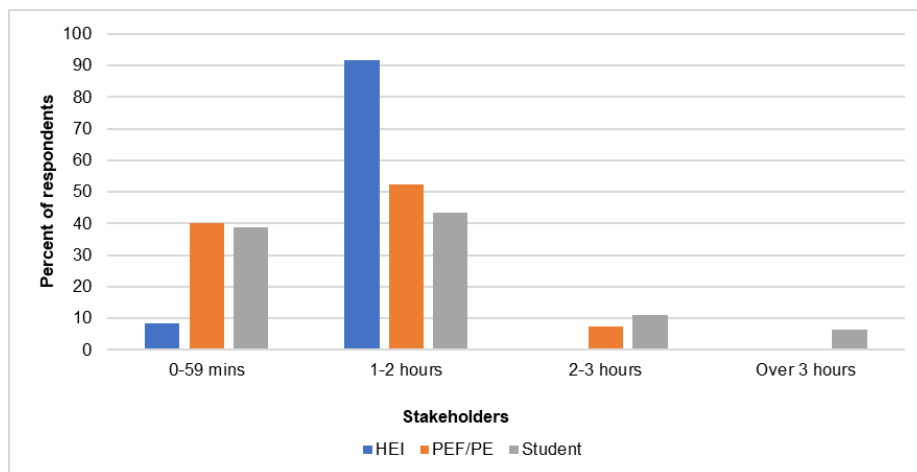
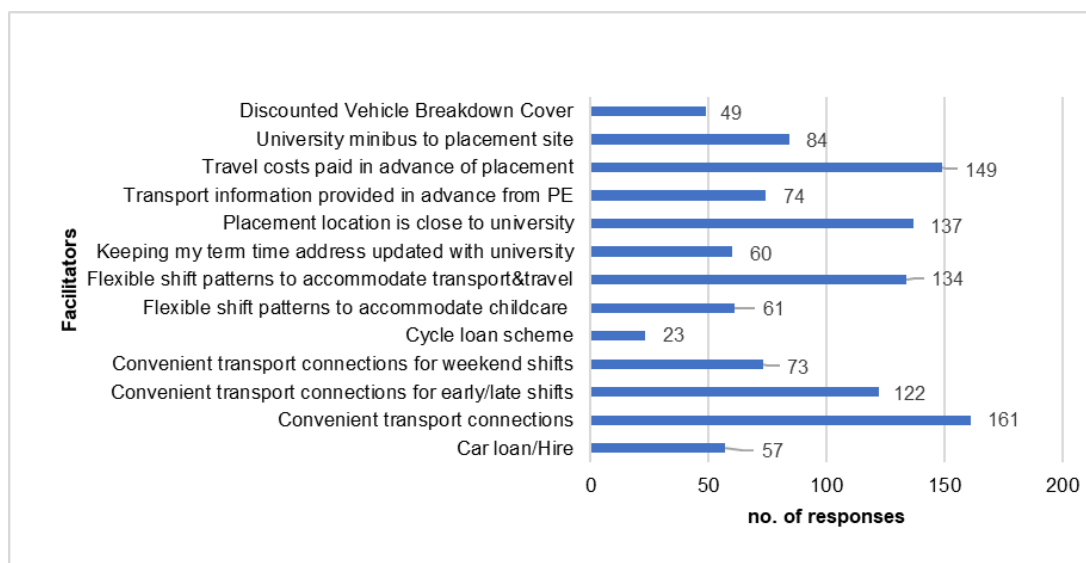


Figure 4

Student reported facilitators to reaching placement



Balancing childcare/not seeing own children as usual during placement, tiredness, lone travelling at night, being a lone female, parking, poor transport timings/connections and financial issues were reported by students as travel concerns. An adult nursing student reported: “Parking charges should not have to be paid when university students do not get paid. Students end up out of pocket which isn’t fair. It’s really hard juggling family life as well as trying to work and do placement hours. Free parking would be beneficial.” (Adult Nursing Student no.231)

Travel Costs

Potential costs paid in advance if available was a strongly reported facilitator (Figure 4). Travel/fuel costs were seen as the strongest barrier to reaching placements by students (Figure 5). Most students (66%) had been able to claim back their fuel/travel costs from the NHSBSA (2023), however concern regarding the

rising costs of fuel were expressed: “I have had 3 community placements which cost a lot in fuel upfront, and the reimbursement does not fully cover the rising petrol/diesel costs.” (Adult Nursing student no. 200).

Some students incurred costs for vehicle business use on for community placements, not covered by TDAE:

With community placements you have to pay extra on your insurance and that’s not something you can claim back on the (TDAE) bursary section...that’s an extra £200 that cost me for business insurance” (Mental health nursing student focus group).

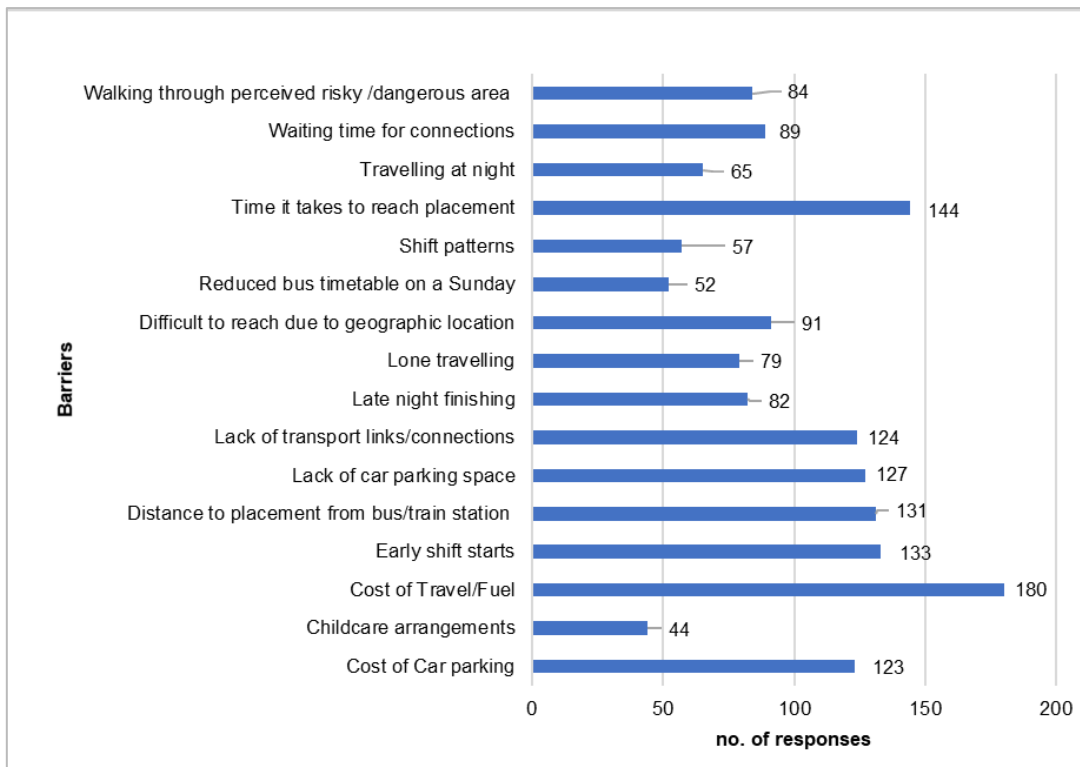
Car parking was available at all placements but was only free at 51% of the sites. Charges ranged from £0 - £13 a day. Students also reported delays in the reimbursement of costs:

It would be good to get reimbursed sooner as after a 4-week block placement, we can be out of pocket close to £2500, that’s an amount a vast majority of students don’t have access to or struggle without for 2-3 months till reimbursements come through. (Orthoptic Student no. 82).

One PE noted the choice between travelling and eating for a student “In one incident the student had no money to travel in or if did, did not have money for food.” (Practice Educator no. 68).

Figure 5

Student reported barriers to reaching placements



Accommodation

Some students (19%) lived away from their usual term address due to distance to placement site. Some orthoptic (n=9), dietetic (n=8) and therapeutic radiography students (n=4) were required to travel more than 51 miles for their placements and were therefore, relocated accommodation for the duration. A minority (7%) reported their university had paid in advance for accommodation to ensure they could reach placement. Cost issues were noted strongly in the qualitative data: "...It's very daunting to have to fork out 10-12 weeks' worth of accommodation fees in one go whilst you wait for reimbursement" (Dietetic student no. 68).

To complete a dietetic placement, one student paid over £6000 for accommodation. Over half of students were unwilling to stay away from usual term address, due to existing family/child/caring roles. The lack of accommodation cooking facilities were reported, resulting in convenience food or eating out costs. The effect of placement, the isolation on wellbeing and mental health were noted: "Placement can be a trying time, cognitively, physically, and emotionally. It is important to me to be able to go home and relax in a comfortable familiar environment during this time." (Physiotherapy student no.167).

Just 18% of placement sites offered accommodation. However, PEFs reported they knew of providers of local accommodation and could share this information with placement students. Staying away from the normal term address was also seen as beneficial for academic work and wellbeing:

...like if I did three 12 hour shifts all together, and stay over for the two nights, or one night. This would free up a lot of time for me to do other things like reflections, reading, assignments and generally looking after my wellbeing a bit better as well. (Adult and children nursing students' focus group)

Personal Safety Issues

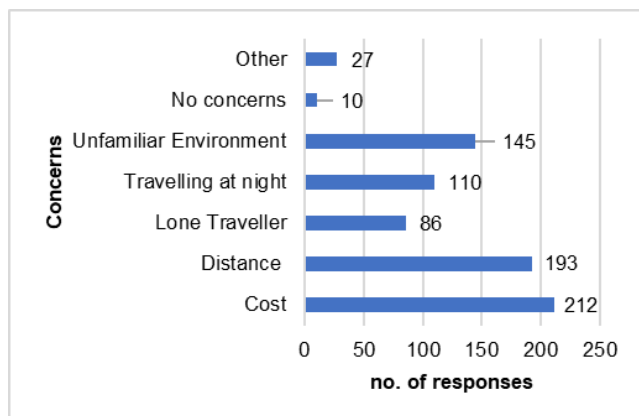
Alongside travel concerns (Figure 6), personal safety issues were reported by 43% of the students, 93% of whom were female. Concerns included driving/walking alone in the dark, dangerous, snowy conditions, unfamiliar areas, and vehicle damage at overnight car parks. Tiredness was commonly noted, especially when driving, as well as harassment from strangers following students traveling alone and waiting at bus stops:

I was waiting at the bus stop at around 7am. It was still dark because it was winter and there was another man at the bus stop that was making me feel uncomfortable. I went to get on the bus and my contactless wasn't working to get a bus ticket even though I showed the driver I had money in my account. He refused to let me on the bus, and I had to wait 45 mins for the next bus and this strange man waited with me...he was making comments such as 'I'd love to have sex with a nurse'. I was scared and there was no one about, I couldn't afford a taxi and it was too far to walk. (Female Adult Nursing Student no.48)

Some students had experienced homophobic and racist abuse whilst travelling to placement: "*I have been shouted at and yelled at multiple times for being a hijabi once told 'You're in England love'.*" (Female Orthoptic Student no,6).

Figure 6

What concerns do students have about travelling to placement?



Coping and Reasonable Adjustments

The physical impact of placement caused students to consider their own wellbeing and put in place coping strategies to cope with university assignments alongside placement/travel to reduce pressure on self:

When you get home and you've got assignments to do. That's what's worrying me this as I have loads to do, especially after the first 2 weeks you are absolutely wiped out with getting to know it all, it's mentally draining. So, that first couple of weeks I don't put too much pressure on myself to get written work done. But at the same time, it's always in my mind and I hate having it hanging over me. (OT student focus group)

Use of a reasonable adjustment plan (RAP) was supportive for students' circumstances to ensure a nearer placement was allocated: "(RAP) ...Allows me to feel respected and ready for the day, and comfortable travelling as I'm not in a rush and panicked I'll get into trouble." (OT student no. 93).

Some PEs offered flexible start and finish times, enabling students to leave early for transport (when the next bus would be one hour later). "It makes such a difference knowing that the placement providers are understanding and accommodating. The pressure is off in that sense which is great" (Dietetic Student no.244).

Some students reported feeling judged about their commitment when trying to reach placement on time at weekends by public transport. The flexible approach did not happen across all settings and communication across team members was important to ensure flexibility:

In agreement with one of my placements I was allowed to leave 10 minutes early to get my bus home or it was a 1hr wait for the next one... I was deducted 10 minutes of each day from my worked hours by my long arm assessor even though we had no proper dinner break due to the nature of the work, and on most days I was arriving at placement 15 minutes early. This caused great frustration, and I did start to wonder if this was a career I wanted to pursue. (Learning Disability Nursing Student no.190)

Discussion and recommendations for practice

The key objective was to explore and recommend sustainable solutions to transport and accommodation challenges, which prevent access to learning environments. The sample was stakeholders from HEIs, HCPs and students. The findings reveal multi-factorial barriers to reaching placements, plus accommodation concerns. This study notes the value of existing HEI allocation policies for placement access and experience, and timely communication of placement travel expectations across the student journey. However, students reported a range of barriers to reaching placements and were unable to decline their placement allocation. These findings concur with the NHS Health Education England (HEE) Reducing Pre-registration Attrition and Improving Retention Report (RePAIR) (2018), which highlights the financial and travel difficulties students face for placements.

Some placements were difficult to reach if a student was not a car owner/driver. Use of a car was perceived as essential by HEIs for placements (58%), but less so by PEFs/PEs (19%) and students (37%), which suggests more placement allocations are available for non-car drivers. In this evaluation, student vehicle ownership was 60%, similar to 66% in Deaville and Grant's (2011) study of medical students across Wales. Fair allocation of placements for car users was seen as contentious in this study by one respondent, who felt punished for having a car, as their placements were further away. Likewise, in Deaville et al., (2009) a focus group member felt penalised for having a car. Students may use their own car by choice or convenience as car use was generally not seen as essential by many of the PEs. It is recommended that HCPs work flexibly to ensure students are enabled to access remote geographical placement experiences, which are not dependent on car use. Car sharing may also be a viable solution. HEIs are recommended to distribute placements equitably by distance across cohorts where possible. Definition of "out of area" placements should also be defined. Establishment of policies regarding number of out of area placements students must complete may contribute to a perceived notion of equity and access to placement distribution among students.

Some HEI allocation policies stated up to a maximum of 90-minutes travel time each way for placement, but this was not always followed, as some students commuted 1-2 hours or more. The distance to reach local semi-rural HCPs, plus transport timetabling limitations may account for the longer travelling time. HEI partnership with HCPs is key to ensuring flexible approaches to shift times. This did not always happen across all settings, sometimes causing long waits for students to catch transport. Hamshire et al., (2012), recommended flexible shift times, whilst ensuring pre-requisite hours are completed. Inflexible shift patterns can impact upon family life, childcare (Hamshire et al., 2013) and academic work (Hardy, 2020).

Travel costs were noted by all stakeholders. Students wanted local travel costs (fuel/tunnel/parking) paid in advance of placement. These findings mirror those of Usher et al., (2022) and Smith et al., (2018), who noted that placement costs contributed to financial challenges and hardship. The RePAIR study (NHS HEE, 2018) also found paying travel costs to be a struggle by 85% of students, with increasing debt concerns also reported by 73%. Travel and accommodation costs in England can be claimed back using the TDAE policy. However, the costs associated with placement needs to be addressed at a wider global level in order to maintain the health and social care workforce. The NHSBSA aims to process claims in 20 working days of receipt (NHSBSA, 2023), but students in this study reported that it sometimes took months before they received payment. The RePAIR report (NHS HEE, 2018) recommends reimbursement in an efficient and timely way. Financial strain caused by placement costs can contribute to negative impacts on health and wellbeing (Wray & McCall, 2007). Students should receive fair and realistic financial support, especially for community placements (Ford, 2023) where costs may be higher. Financing placement costs upfront is an ongoing issue for students as financial concerns were found by 37% of students in the National Education and Training Survey (NHS HEE, 2022). Several English funding streams exist including LSF and Exceptional Support Fund (ESF)

(NHSBSA, 2023). It is possible advanced payments for placement costs would reduce attrition and draw more students into the health and social care workforce.

Isolation from family and friends, due to relocation was reported. Previous contemporary research found social isolation and separation from families and support systems as barriers to completing placements (Edmunds & Harris, 2015). However, a remote placement can encourage a student to consider working in a remote or rural area (Campbell et al., 2021). Some local HEI pre-registration programmes require students to relocate due to limited commutable placements offers.

Significant concerns about student personal safety were noted in this evaluation. Students need comprehensive personal protective safety and assertiveness training through their programme to manage incidents, which they may encounter during placements. Requesting students to park off-site potentially leads to more personal safety incidents. The PEF/PE can prioritise journey planning with students to avoid travel risks, and support flexible shift times to enable their student to complete their pre-registration hours, within existing transport timetabling limits. Incidents should also be recorded by HEIs and HCPs.

This study made sixteen recommendations, which were communicated to the regional NHS education transformation team and practice learning lead. One recommendation statement for all was produced:

Transport and travel issues can be stressful and emotive for all parties. All parties to demonstrate appropriate values and behaviours, and work collaboratively to achieve solutions. Placement staff and placement organisations need to be mindful of the stress and potential negative impact on student wellbeing when there are transport issues.

HEIs are recommended to make use reasonable adjustment plans to include placement travel and accommodation needs, and to communicate the placement allocation policy across the student journey. They should consider giving car owners closer placements, reduce assignment load during placement and deliver personal safety training. It is also recommended that HEIs consider the use of a placement minibus/commissioned bus trial from a university towards placement locations which are difficult to reach by public transport. This potential solution could have a significant impact on the student experience and access to placements, but would be challenging to implement given the associated costs and resourcing. PEFs/PEs are recommended to allow free parking onsite, check business use on vehicle insurance, encourage flexibility in shift times/car sharing and collate accommodation information. HCPs should also offer their unused semi-rural unutilised placement capacity to neighbouring HEIs where transport links may be stronger. Students are encouraged to be realistic about the impact of placement on wellbeing, finances and work/life balance. Students should prepare well for placement, practice their journey prior to commencing, understand the TDAE, make prompt claims and be aware of personal safety. Students should be prepared to self-manage assignment load, source the cheapest ticket options and explore alternative funding options (ESF/LSF). Students should also consider using alternative accommodation when undertaking long shifts to reduce burden.

This study also made recommendations to NHSE, to explain “reasonably practical” terminology in the TDAE, ensure claims are paid in 20 working days, to consider payment upfront for travel/accommodation, to consider claims for vehicle insurance business cover, to work with HEIs to consider funding for a pilot minibus project and to increase funding at HEIs for placement administration.

Bus recommendations included expanding routes across the region to HCPs, to align with shift times, and with bus timetables and to be mindful of student safety. These recommendations were communicated to the city region combined authority, to three local authorities and two bus companies. Engagement from the transport providers was low; however, the city region combined authority used the findings towards the forthcoming St Helens bus-franchising scheme (Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, 2024).

Limitations

External validity of this study is low due to the small sample size, so findings should be interpreted with caution as they may not be generalisable to other areas (student survey response rate 4%). Differing levels

of engagement in the project by HEIs resulted in sample bias as 64% student respondents were from one university. The low student response rate may be attributable to survey fatigue at academic year commencement. Differing placement allocation policies across the globe may limit the generalisability and relevance of the findings.

Conclusion

This service evaluation objective was to explore and recommend sustainable solutions to transport and accommodation challenges, which prevent access to learning environments. The findings highlight the challenges for all parties in sourcing and reaching accessible placements. Students have clearly voiced a range of transport and accommodation concerns including their own personal safety, transport routes and timetabling challenges, financial and health burdens and working to rigid shift patterns. A range of recommendations to support students, placement providers and university placement teams were developed by the steering group from the data, which were communicated to bus companies, the NHSBSA and to stakeholders via the regional education transformation team for action. Practice education facilitators, practice educators and universities should continue to work collaboratively to strengthen systems to enable fair and accessible placement allocations across the region. Safety of students should be paramount. Implementing the recommendations within this paper will contribute towards the placement matching process, student safety, and will support training for the future health and social care workforce. Further research is needed to explore personal safety concerns for students during their journeys for placement.

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions

HEI Survey Questions

1. At what point in the student's journey do you inform them that there will potentially be travel to placements? tick as many as apply.(at enrolment/induction/interview/offer/website/other)
2. Are students keeping their term time address up to date to ease placement allocations?
3. What factors do you take into account when placing a Nursing/Midwife/AHPs student on placement?
4. How do you match students term time address with the placement location?
5. Do students need a car to reach any placements from your HEI?
6. Do students need to use a car to complete practice activity?
7. Do you check if students have business use cover on their car insurance before placements where they need to use a car for practice activities?
8. Which mode of transport is most utilised by your students travelling to placements?
(Bus/car/cycle/ferry/train/tram/walk/e-scooter/other)
9. Which mode of transport is most utilised by your students travelling to placements? (click the top 3) (Bus/car/cycle/ferry/train/tram/walk/e-scooter/other)
10. What is the longest journey a student has been asked to travel (in hours) by your HEI 2022/23 for a placement/s where they are not re-locating accommodation? (daily commute from term address)
11. What is the furthest distance in miles a student has been asked to travel by your HEI 2022/23 for a placement where they are not re-locating accommodation? (daily commute from term address)
12. Does your HEI have a car loan/hire scheme for students?
13. Does your university offer a minibus to take students across the region to placement?
14. Please can you describe particular local transport challenges related to your HEI / location?
15. Which factors below does your HEI see as barriers to reaching placements? (Childcare/cost of car parking/cost of travel/early shift starts/Getting to the placement from the bus/train station due to distance/lack of car parking space/lack of transport links-connections/late night finishing/long travelling/Placement is difficult to reach due to geographic location/Reduced bus timetable on a Sunday/ shift patterns/time it takes to reach placement/travelling at night/waiting time for connections).
16. Do you have any comments about the transport and accommodation barriers to accessing placements
17. Which factors below does your HEI see as facilitators to access placements? (Car loan-hire option/convenient transport connections/convenient transport connections for early and late shifts/convenient transport connections for weekend shifts/ cycle loan schemes/flexible shift patterns to accommodate childcare/flexible shift patterns to accommodate travel/transport needs/placement location is close to university/Provision of travel expectations at interview and offer letter/Transport information provided in advance from Practice Educator/Travel costs paid in advance of placement/ University minibus to placement site/When students keep their term time address updated with the university placement team)
18. Do you have any comments about the transport and accommodation factors which facilitate access to placements?
19. Do you keep data on why placements are declined by the student due to transport reasons?
20. What do you imagine could be successful transport solutions for students access to placements?
21. How are transport challenges impacting on placement utilisation?
22. How are accommodation challenges impacting on placement utilisation?
23. Do you foresee any future transport and accommodation challenges relating to placements, from the recent publication of the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan 2023?
24. Do you make students aware of the NHS learning support fund?
25. Do students at your HEI apply for the NHS learning support fund

26. Can you estimate what percentage of nursing/midwifery/AHP students from your HEI apply for this fund each year?
27. Do you think this fund is possibly under-utilised by your student population?/comments

Practice Education Facilitator/Practice Educator Survey Questions

1. Are you a Practice Education Facilitator (PEF) or Practice Educator (PE) (e.g. mentor, practice assessor, practice supervisor, placement trainer)
2. Which placement provider are you affiliated to?
3. Which professionals do you train at your organisation?
4. Do students need a car to reach any placements at your organisation? (Yes/No/Don't know)
5. Do students need to be able to drive to complete practice activity at your organisation?
6. Do students need to own a car to complete practice placement activity at your organisation?
7. Do you check if students have business use cover on their car insurance before allocating placements where they need to use a car for practice activities? (Yes/No/Don't know)
8. Which Universities are sending students to your organisation?
9. Is there car parking available at your organisation? (Yes/No/Don't know)
10. Is the car parking free for students? (Yes/No/Don't know)
11. What is the charge for car parking at your organisation per day?
12. Which mode of transport is most accessible for your organisation for students?
(Bus/car/cycle/ferry/train/tram/walk/e-scooter/other)
13. Do you think any of these other modes of transport could be used to reach your placement?
(Cycle loan/partly cycle from train station/university minibus/car hire loan scheme/e-scooter).
14. What is the longest daily commute a student has been asked to travel to your organisation for placement from their normal term time address? (0-60mins/1-2 hours 2-3 hours/over 3 hours)
15. What is the furthest distance in miles a student has been asked to travel for their daily commute to your organisation from their normal term time address? (0-10 miles/11-20/21-30/31-40/41-50/over 50 miles/don't know).
16. Does your organisation have a car loan/hire scheme for students? (Yes/No/Don't know)
17. Does your organisation have a cycle loan/hire scheme for students? (Yes/No/Don't know)
18. Does your organisation offer accommodation? (Yes/No/Don't know)
19. If yes what is the cost?
20. Please can you describe particular local transport challenges related to your organisation/location
21. Do you keep data on why placements are declined by the student due to transport reasons?
22. Which factors are barriers to reaching placements? (Childcare/cost of car parking/cost of travel/early shift starts/Getting to the placement from the bus/train station due to distance/lack of car parking space/lack of transport links-connections/late night finishing/lone travelling/Placement is difficult to reach due to geographic location/Reduced bus timetable on a Sunday/ shift patterns/time it takes to reach placement/travelling at night/waiting time for connections).
23. Do you have any comments about the transport and accommodation barriers to accessing placements
24. Which of the following factors facilitate access to placements? (Car loan-hire option/convenient transport connections/convenient transport connections for early and late shifts/convenient transport connections for weekend shifts/ cycle loan schemes/flexible shift patterns to accommodate childcare/flexible shift patterns to accommodate travel/transport needs/placement location is close to university/Transport information provided in advance from Practice Educator/Travel costs paid in advance of placement/ University minibus to placement site).
25. Do you have any comments about the transport and accommodation factors which facilitate access to placements?
26. Does supervising a student, who has a long and complicated journey to placement, impact on your working day? (Yes/No/Describe)

27. Do you make any reasonable adjustments for students who have a long or complicated journey to placement? (Yes/No/Describe)
28. Does a long or complicated journey to placement impact on a student's learning opportunities? (Yes/No/Describe)

Student Survey Questions

1. What course are you studying?
2. Which university are you studying at?
3. Are you an apprentice? (Yes/No)
4. What is your year of study? (1/2/3/4)
5. How many practice placements have you attended? (0/1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8+)
6. Do you hold a full driving licence to give eligibility for driving in the UK? (Yes/No)
7. Are you a vehicle owner? (Yes/No)
8. How many placements have you needed to use your own vehicle for to reach the placement location? (0/1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8+ n/a).
9. How many placements have you needed to use your own vehicle for placement purposes? For example - Home visits or reaching remote clinics.
10. Do you have business use on your Vehicle Insurance for practice placement purposes? (Yes/No/n/a/Don't know)
11. If yes, did you incur a vehicle insurance cost for business use of your vehicle?
12. Have you been able to re-claim vehicle costs (Fuel/tunnel/parking) for placement use? (Yes/No/Don't Know/n/a)
13. Do you know how to claim back your fuel/travel costs used for placement? (Yes/No/Don't Know/n/a)
14. Have you needed to give other students a lift in your vehicle to placement for any reason? (Yes/No/n/a).
15. What is the longest journey you have been asked to travel to the placement(s) location from your normal term time address? (0-60mins/1-2 hours 2-3 hours/over 3 hours)
16. What is the furthest distance in miles that you have been asked to travel to placement(s) location from your normal term time address? (0-10 miles/11-20/21-30/31-40/41-50/over 50 miles/don't know).
17. Have you used public transport to travel to placement/s? (Yes/No)
18. Which mode of transport did you use to travel to placement location? (Bus/car/cycle/ferry/train/tram/walk/e-scooter/other)
19. Would you consider using any of these other modes of transport (if available) to reach placement? (Car hire-loan scheme/University Minibus (If Applicable)/ Partly cycle from train station/cycle loan/e-scooter/none of the above).
20. Thinking back to placements you have attended, what is the maximum number of transport changes you have used to reach placement from your usual term address? (1/2/3/4+).
21. In general, how would you describe the ease of your journeys to reach your placement using public transport? (Very poor/poor/average/good/very good)
22. Can you describe in detail a particular journey to placement you have experienced where connections were challenging. Please include location, start and finish points, modes of travel and times of day.
23. Can you describe in detail a journey to placement where connections were good. Please include location, start and finish points, mode of travel and times of day
24. What concerns do you have about travelling to placement? (Cost/distance/lone traveller/travelling at night/unfamiliar environment/no concerns/other).
25. Have you needed to stay in accommodation at your placement location because it is far away? If Yes please state where, duration and cost for the number of night(s)
26. Have you ever declined a placement due to transport or travel reasons? (Yes/No)
27. Have you ever declined a placement due to distance reasons? (Yes/No)

28. Can you please describe your particular reasons for declining the placement/s due to transport or distance
29. Has your university ever paid in advance of your placement for accommodation to ensure you can get to the placement? (Yes/No)
30. Are you willing to stay at placement accommodation away from your normal term time address? (Yes/No/undecided) If No, why?
31. Did your university explain there would be travel to placements before enrolment? (Yes/No/Don't know)
32. At what point on your student journey did your university inform you there would be travel to placements? (at enrolment/induction/interview/offer/website/Don't remember).
33. Which factors below are barriers to reaching placements? Click as many as apply (Childcare/cost of car parking/cost of travel/early shift starts/Getting to the placement from the bus/train station due to distance/lack of car parking space/lack of transport links-connections/late night finishing/lone travelling/Placement is difficult to reach due to geographic location/Reduced bus timetable on a Sunday/ shift patterns/time it takes to reach placement/travelling at night/waiting time for connections).
34. Do you have any comments about the transport and accommodation barriers to accessing placements
35. Have you experienced any personal safety incidents during your commute to and from placement? (Yes/No and describe).
36. Which of the following factors facilitate access to placements? Tick as many as apply ? (Car loan-hire option/convenient transport connections/convenient transport connections for early and late shifts/convenient transport connections for weekend shifts/ cycle loan schemes/flexible shift patterns to accommodate childcare/flexible shift patterns to accommodate travel/transport needs/placement location is close to university/Transport information provided in advance from Practice Educator/Travel costs paid in advance of placement/ University minibus to placement site).
37. Do you have any comments about the transport and accommodation factors which facilitate access to placements?
38. Which transport apps do you use to plan your journeys? (click as many as apply) (Google maps/Waze/city mapper/national rail app/Mersey travel/apple maps).
39. Have you ever needed any reasonable adjustments, made by your practice educator when you have had a long/complicated journey to placement?
40. If yes, what were the adjustments made?
41. If you have had reasonable adjustments due to long or complicated journeys to placement/s, explain how this impacts upon you as a learner.